

THE PATH OF RETURN

God of all mercy, your Son proclaimed good news to the poor, release to the captives, and freedom to the oppressed: anoint us with your Holy Spirit and set all your people free to praise you in Christ our Lord.

A Collect for 3rd Sunday after the Epiphany, based on Additional Collects, Common Worship

THE THIRD SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY
 JONAH 3:1-5, 10, PSALM 62:6-14, 1 CORINTHIANS 7:29-31, MARK 1:14-20
 JANUARY 21, 2018

ST. MARK'S-IN-THE-VALLEY
 EPISCOPAL CHURCH AND PRESCHOOL

Los Olivos, California

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THE GOSPEL READING: MARK 1:14-20

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea – for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

It still being January (though we're getting through the month quickly), we may have some vestige of New Year resolutions in place – or at least a memory of what they were – or may recall some gist or theme we might still be hoping for in 2018.

And this year, in our part of the world, anyway, there is the realization that 2017 ended with a lot of distress and distraction: the crisis of the Thomas fire and 2018 dawning with the jaw-dropping crisis of the Montecito mudslide.

As I said last week, it seems

like Lent came early, that the message of Ash Wednesday, "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return" came very early this year.... No doubt we'll hear it differently this year when we gather for actual Ash Wednesday on February 14 (yes, Valentine's Day – which will, possibly, remind us that life – all of it – is all for love).

And, of course, we're living in a Lenten world: reminded this past week of the distance of Dr. King's dream of racial equality, reminded yesterday of the enormous dissonance we have in being a multi-

gendered humanity as God created us to be in God's image, expressing God's femininity and God's masculinity in the world, so often incapable, it seems, of deeply valuing one another, and as our confidence in our government and institutions approach all-time lows, the stock market soars while wages for the majority remain stagnant, and many are frozen in poverty, as the opioid crisis burgeons, accounts of sexual assault and abuse proliferate, and false alarms of a nuclear attack seem entirely plausible...

So we may wonder: "why bother?"

Or we may run off in all directions, urgently putting out all the fires we can, while trying to clean up the mud...

Or we may cut off to meet our own "needs," to follow our own "passion," and to distance ourselves from feeling obligated – especially realizing how often people take more than they give.... So we go it alone, maybe captured in a thought silo from some media stream, parroting the words of one talking head or another, or just escaping in social media or entertainment, some stimulation or numbing – any alteration of life will do.

So then we come to church and hear, in this gospel reading, Jesus going around Galilee proclaiming the good news of God

saying, "repent, and believe in the good news."

It's hard for us to listen to this, of course, for a variety of reasons. For one, it's kind of a churchy cliché. Also, there's that word "repent," that we won't listen to because of its misuse by manipulative and judgmental religious figures through the years.

But let's focus on "repent" for a moment....

Authors John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg remind us that the word is shaped by the Jewish experience of exile in Babylon and that it means to **return from exile to the place of God's presence**. So repenting is following the way that leads out of our exile, separation, alienation, and estrangement to reconnection with the Sacred.

They go on to say that, in the New Testament, the root of the Greek word translated as "repent" means "go beyond the mind that you have," to enter into a new mind-set, a new way of seeing. To repent means to begin seeing differently.

Here is the teaching of Jesus through the ages and now: an invitation to a new way of seeing, a renewal of our minds and hearts – especially in the stress and strain of a challenging world.

In the scripture readings today, in the voices and witness of Jonah, Paul and in the gospel

according to Mark we hear of the nature of the world – the whole world as God’s world and God’s concern, God’s habitation and the focus of God’s love. Additionally, within that world, people are called into God’s work of loving the world into this new way of seeing, that Jesus proclaimed and still proclaims in us and with us.

We hear that all people are connected to God: those who identify with God as well as all who do not – all people are an extension of God’s love of the entirety of reality.

I tend to identify with Jonah and his protests and resistance to God. He defies God who calls him to do something very specific that God wants done – the warning of the Assyrians in Ninevah – and it isn’t just that Jonah is complacent or garden-variety lazy. In fact, Jonah *hates* the Assyrians so much that he wants God’s mission, God’s intention to fail.

So it takes Jonah awhile to get where God has him going and then God does accomplish what God set out to do all along. And, if consistency counts, then Jonah is mad at God....

We might keep the story of Jonah in mind when we are being resistant to what we know we need to be doing – and when it seems whatever we’re involved in is taking a very long time – and when we

think we can manipulate God – hating what or who God loves.

Jonah doesn’t get to stay home – he’s pushed out of his comfort zone and so may we be in accomplishing with God what God has in mind for us individually, and as St. Mark’s, and as a faith community in a wider community.

There is a lot of resonance between the Jonah reading and the reading from the gospel according to Mark – though Simon and Andrew, James and John seem a bit more positive characters (and they *go* fishing rather than getting *swallowed* by a fish).

They, like Jonah, were drawn out of the regular pattern of their lives to collaborate in a larger purpose and action in the world. They were very much connected to the world and also connected to God.

This calling of the disciples is sometimes seen as magical – that Jesus just walks by and puts these hapless fisherfolk in a trance and carries them off – like some cult leader or a magician or hypnotist.

In fact, it is worth reexamining the story and noticing that Jesus may have known these friends for some time – and their willingness to leave their regular work to work with Jesus as not a radical departure but is recognizing a moment for action, time to move out on a long-held objective.

I've always been caught by that small detail in the James and John calling story where the narrator notes they left their father Zebedee in the boat... Some years back I wrote something about that – Zebedee taking Jesus and his boys to task for being too heavenly-minded. But the reality is that James and John may very well have come back to fish with their father. Especially after the crucifixion, we see scenes of these fisherfolk back on the water – they never forgot their trade and held onto their gear.

So to live the life of God is to live it in the world, using our actual gifts and abilities – and also hearing God's particular call to love the world as God loves the world.

So the stories about Jonah, Simon and Andrew, James and John recognize movement and change and disruption and, at times, going places and doing things that are, potentially, at times, repugnant or difficult or demanding. The reading from Paul's letter to the Corinthians highlights how our regular lives can look very different in the light of God's call to attend to the life of the world, and how priorities and our sense of time can shift in appearance.

To be so markedly oriented outside of ourselves is not very resonant with the world many of us live in, in which we want things comfortable and only to our own

choosing, in our control and acceptable to us. We get quite attached – even to things that are good – and then we hear Paul saying: “the present form of this world is passing away.”

So, while I'm speaking of seeing things differently, and in the light of the calling and response of Simon and Andrew, James and John, I want to offer another counter-cultural reality: that commitment is freeing.

The antidote to a world gone bad, to an Ash Wednesday world, is not disconnecting or distancing ourselves, running from obligation in the face of disappointment, going it alone or giving up, nor is it running ourselves into the ground.

What saves us from group-think and frenzy, from despair and depression is a core commitment to our spiritual practice, commitment within the group or community (or communities) we are called to love, and commitment to active service all arising from and anchored in the presence of God-with-us, God within us, God to whom we wholly give ourselves. This commitment allows us to act by choice, gives us balance and perspective, draws us from the merely urgent, from being taken over or taken hostage, and from losing our freedom, our minds and our lives.

Yes even – or especially – in an Ash Wednesday world.